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## Massachusetts Leads 1996 Cranberry Crop

Crisp fall weather is here and Massachusetts residents are in store for the vivid sight of crimson cranberry bogs. They won't be disappointed with this year's view, since Massachusetts is expected to top the list of cranberry producers for 1996. The yield will be 1.97 million barrels, according to crop predictions recently released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. These predictions are particularly meaningful this year due to a drought in New England last summer, which threatened this year's results.

"We're thrilled about the positive crop predictions," said Jeff LaFleur of the Cape Cod Cranberry Growers' Association. "The growers worked extremely hard last year to protect this year's crop by conserving and recycling water from grower to grower, making sure that each bog received the necessary supply."

By nature and necessity, cranberry growers are masters of water management and careful stewards of the environment. They are committed to preserving the same fragile environment upon which their livelihood depends. Last year's use of these conservation practices probably saved the cranberry vines from suffering damage - and set the scene for the predicted record harvest.

Cranberries are Massachusetts' number one agricultural crop, generating approximately \$200 million for the state's economy and providing jobs for more than 5,600. Of the approximate 1,000 cranberry growers in North America, 560 are in Massachusetts.

"Many of the cranberry bogs in Massachusetts have

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been handed down from generation to generation," said Chris Phillips, spokesperson for Ocean Spray Cranberries, the Massachusetts-based grower cooperative. "And in many cases, family members from 2 or even 3 generations work side by side on these bogs. The Massachusetts cranberry industry is deeply seeded in tradition, and for most growers, tending to their cranberry bogs is not just a job, but a way of life."

The natural wetlands of southeastern Massachusetts and the Cape Cod areas contain the precise combination of sand and peat vital for healthy cranberry bogs. Since cranberry vines are perennial, cranberry farmers do not replant every year, but have perfected the process of maintenance and care to allow the bogs to reproduce year after year. Some cranberry bogs in Massachusetts have been producing for more than one hundred years.

In Massachusetts, every planted acre of cranberries is supported by 4 acres of surrounding wetlands and uplands. In total, Massachusetts is home to 13,500 acres of cranberry wetlands systems, with approximately 50,000 acres of supporting wetlands and uplands. These supporting acres provide natural habitats for a diverse population of vegetation and wildlife that chirp, swim, slither and flourish in the diverse environment of a cranberry bog.

Cranberries used to be harvested by hand with a cranberry scoop. Then came dry harvesting; a method used for many years in Massachusetts. Only dry harvested cranberries are sold as fresh fruit in New England.

In recent years, wet harvesting has become popular. First developed in Wisconsin, the wet method increases a growers yield about 15%. In dry harvesting, the weather conditions have to be perfect. Even though a day may be sunny, if the dew is still on the vines, the dry harvesting cannot be done. With wet harvesting, the grower determines when the berries will be picked because he controls the conditions.

The bogs are flooded to a depth of about 18 inches. The large egg-beater-like machines churn up the water and dislodge the berries from the vines. The berries float to the top and are corralled to shore. After this corraling (called booming or rafting) takes place, the berries are rushed into waiting trucks where they are cleaned of leaves and undergrown fruit. Over 80% of the bogs in Massachusetts are now wet harvested.

Ocean Spray, although the largest, is not the only company which markets cranberries. Decas Cranberry Sales Co., Hiller Cranberry Sale Co., Welch's and Veryfine are some others.